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(54) **IMAGE SENSOR DEFECT IDENTIFICATION
USING BLURRING TECHNIQUES**

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H04N 5/367	(2011.01)
H04N 17/00	(2006.01)

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CPC **H04N 5/2176** (2013.01); **H04N 5/3675** (2013.01); **H04N 17/002** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

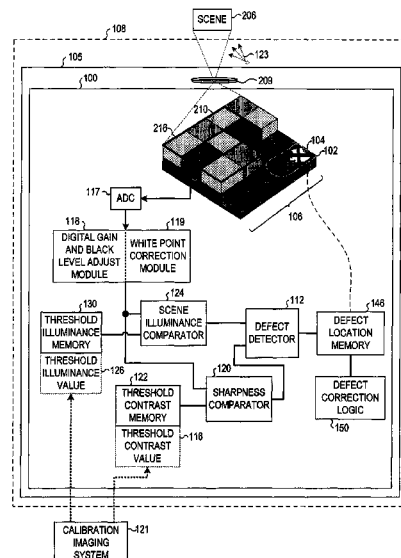
CPC **H04N 5/2176**
USPC **348/126**
See application file for complete search history.

(57)

ABSTRACT

Embodiments described herein may operate to image a scene with an imaging system using an image blurring technique. An image sensor array (ISA) element may be identified as a dark defect element if a first ratio of an average of a set of illuminance signal magnitudes from a set of surrounding ISA elements to a magnitude of an illuminance signal from the ISA element is greater than a threshold sharpness value. The image sensor array element may be identified as a bright defect element if a second ratio of the magnitude of the illuminance signal from the ISA element to the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements is greater than the threshold sharpness value.

16 Claims, 7 Drawing Sheets



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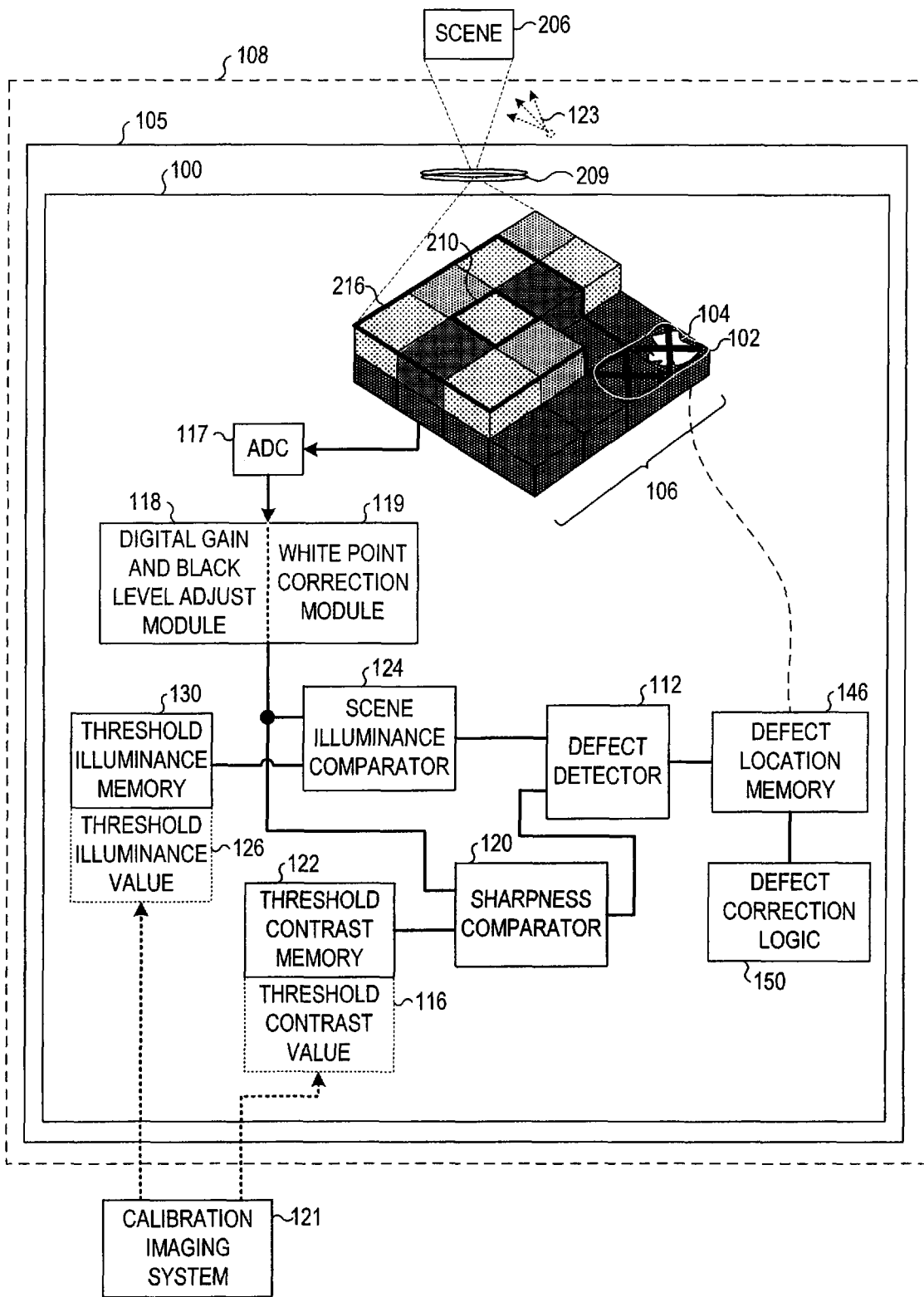


FIG. 1

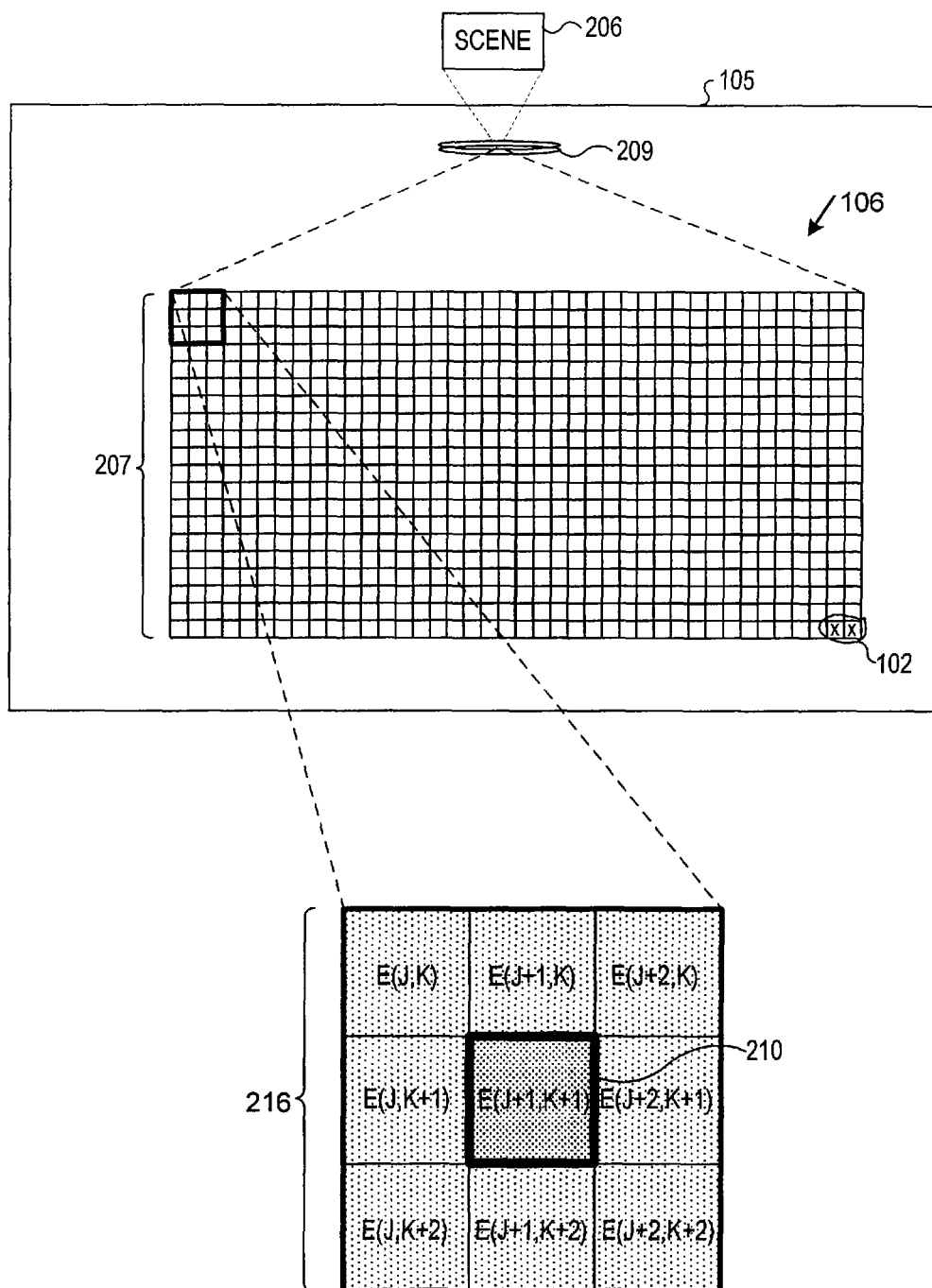


FIG. 2

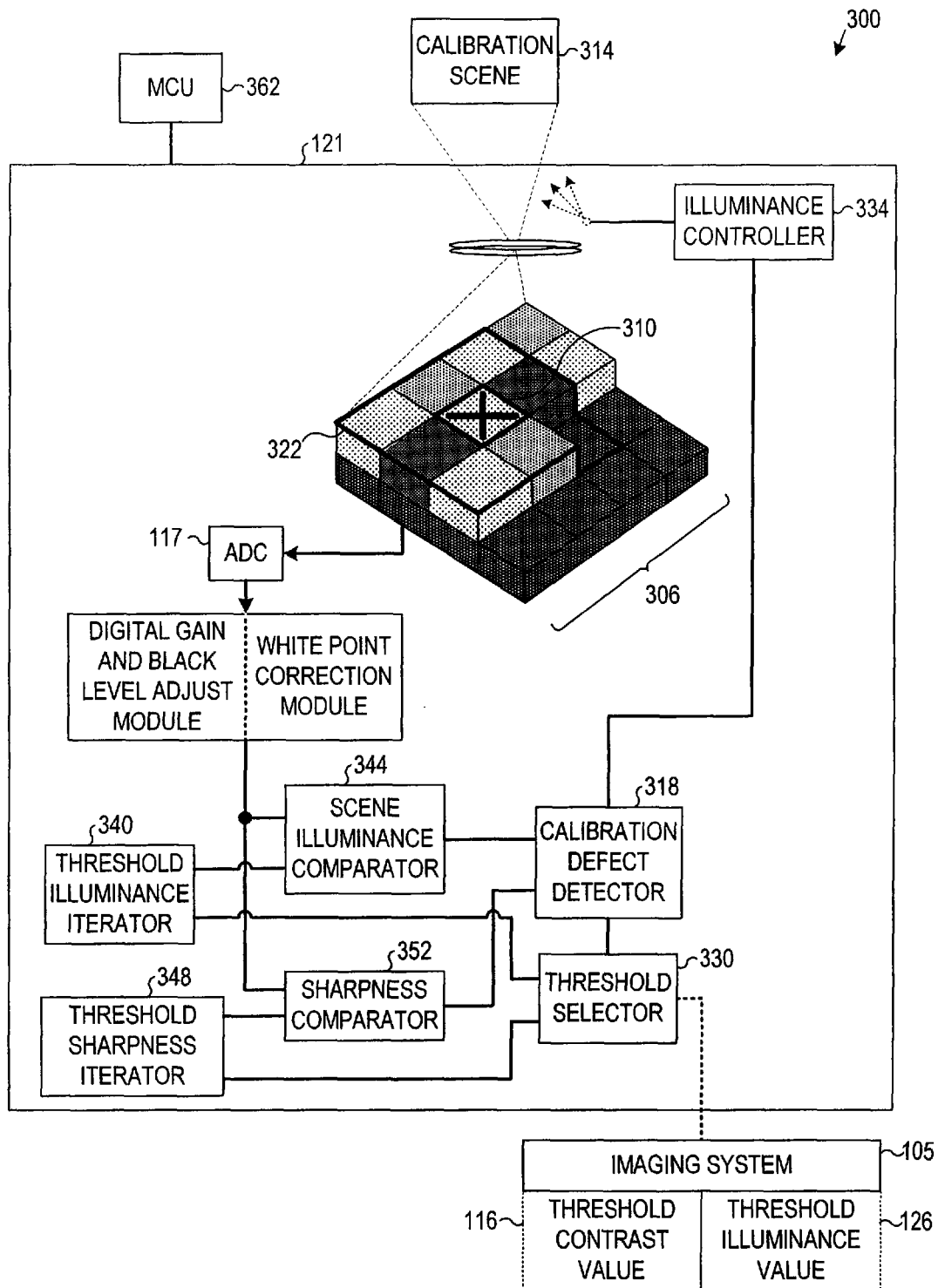


FIG. 3

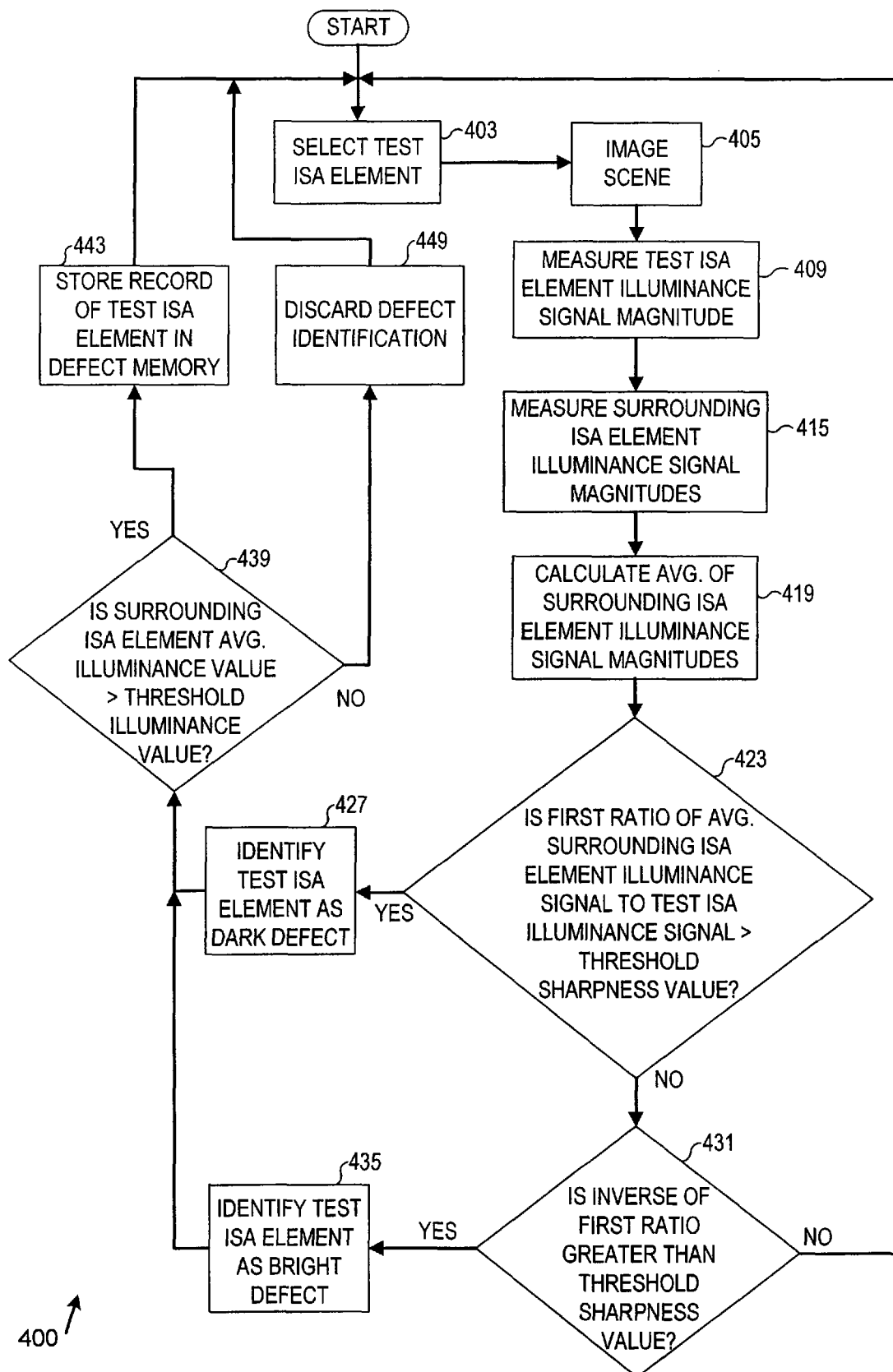


FIG. 4

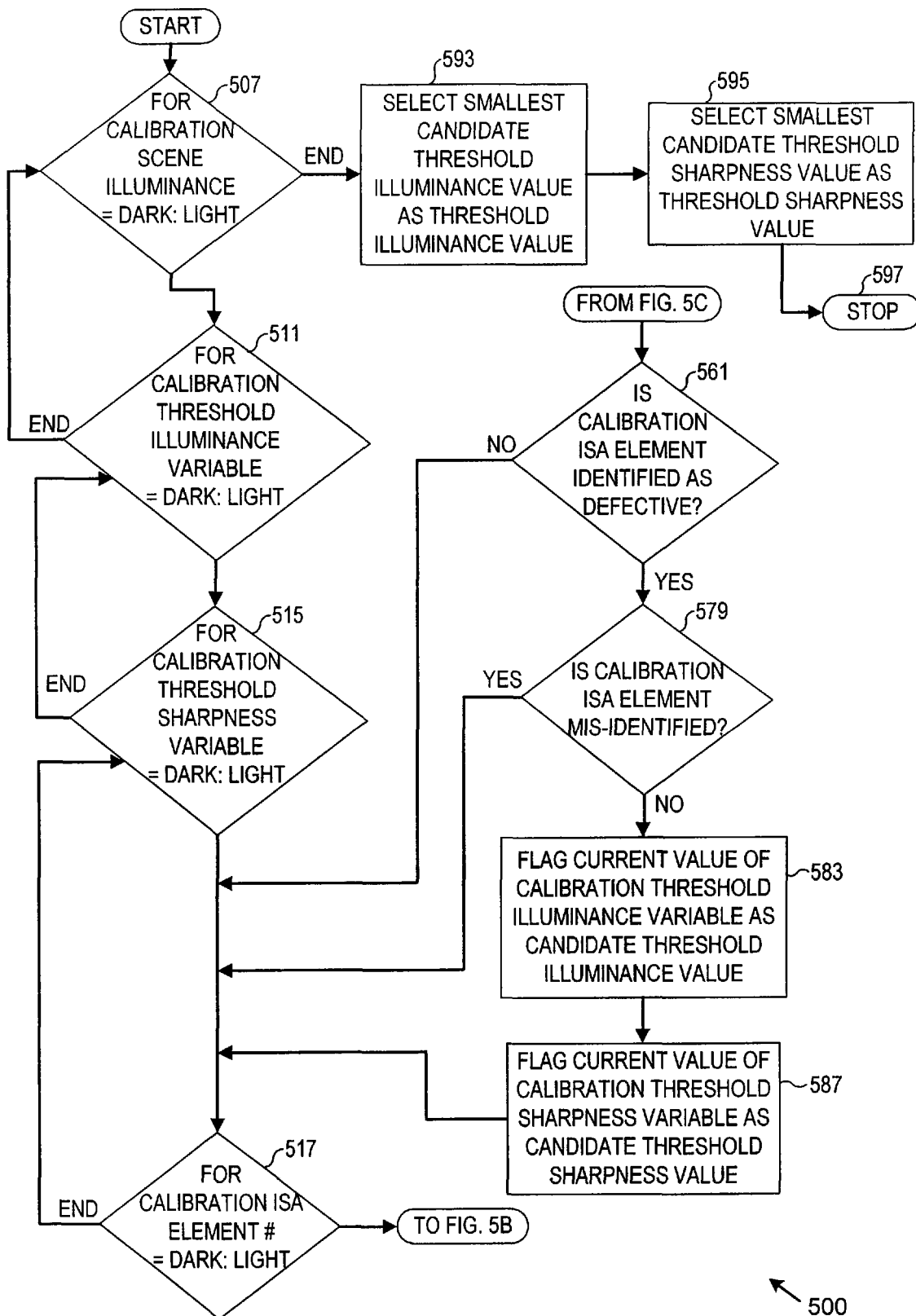


FIG. 5A

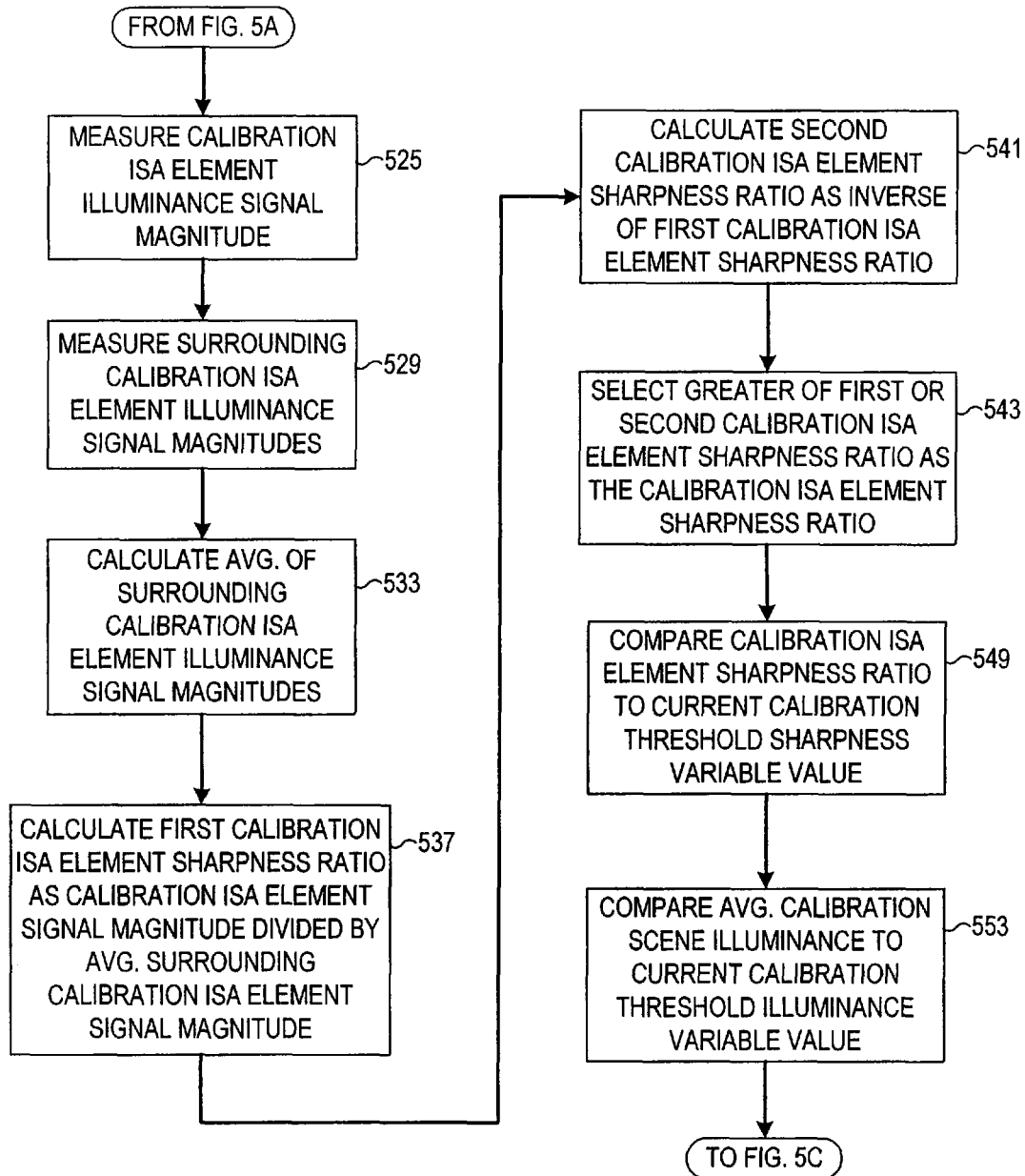


FIG. 5B

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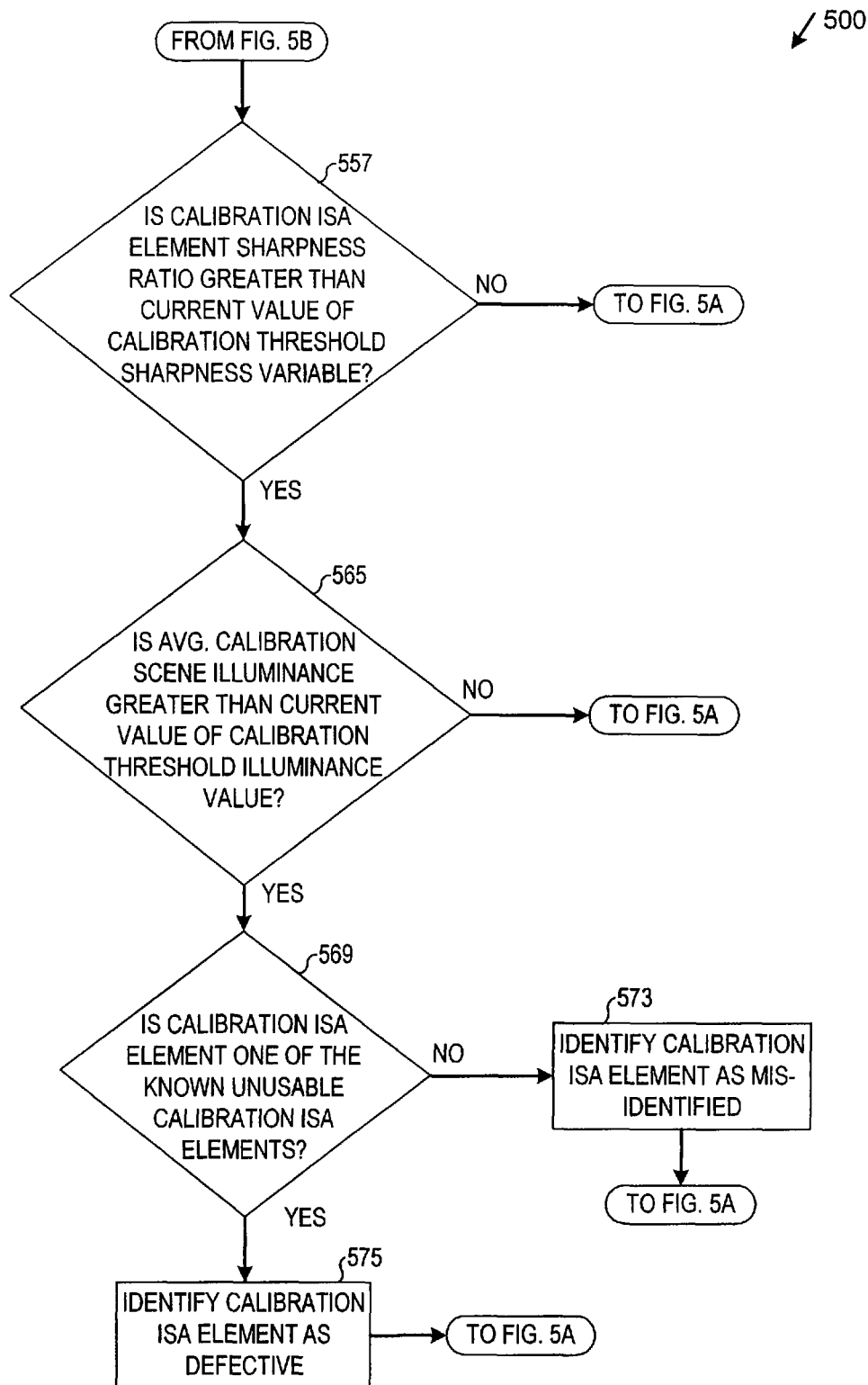


FIG. 5C

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IMAGE SENSOR DEFECT IDENTIFICATION USING BLURRING TECHNIQUES

PRIORITY APPLICATION

This application is a continuation of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/514,531, filed Aug. 31, 2006, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD

Various embodiments described herein relate to apparatus, systems, and methods associated with imaging and image sensor arrays, including the detection of sensor defects.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Image sensors are widely used in a variety of consumer electronic devices, including digital cameras and cellular telephones with built-in digital cameras. An image sensor may comprise a matrix of sensor elements. If one or more sensor elements are defective or occluded, this condition may degrade image quality.

Sensor elements may include “bright defects” and “dark defects,” perhaps causing them to be unusable. Some bright and dark defects may be of a “stuck pixel” variety. That is, an output signal from a stuck sensor element may register a fixed signal level regardless of the brightness of light incident to the element. The terms “defective element” and “unusable element” are used interchangeably herein. “Brightness of light” may hereinafter be referred to using the more precise term “illuminance.” Units of lux, or lumens per square meter, may be used as a measure of illuminance.

An image sensor may convert light to analog sensor element output signals. An analog to digital converter (ADC) may convert the sensor element output signals to a digital format. A least significant bit (LSB) associated with the ADC may establish a granularity with which illuminance sensed by the sensor element may be measured. Thus, in the field of digital imaging, illuminance may also be expressed in LSB units.

A dark defect may also result from a dust particle lodged against the sensor element, blocking some or all of the light that might otherwise impinge on the element. If all light is blocked, the sensor element output signal may remain fixed as the illuminance incident to the sensor element changes. If the incident light is only partially blocked, and the partially-blocked sensor element is not stuck, the element output signal may vary as the incident illuminance varies. In the latter case, however, the output signal may not be as large as if the sensor element were not partially blocked.

Some methods are available to identify unusable sensor elements at a production facility following fabrication. For example, each production sensor may be tested and calibrated under controlled conditions. Such methods may incur substantial cost, and may fail to identify dark defects resulting from dust particles.

Consider, for example, a cellular telephone with a built-in camera. The camera sensor may have been tested and calibrated at the semiconductor manufacturing facility, following fabrication and before shipment to a cellular telephone manufacturer. During camera module assembly, a dust particle inside the camera module may break free and land on the surface of one or more sensor elements. The resulting dark defect may subsequently manifest itself as a cluster of dark pixels on captured images. Thus, there is a need to identify and rectify such defects.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of an apparatus according to various embodiments of the invention.

FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram of an image sensor array (ISA) according to various embodiments of the invention.

FIG. 3 is a block diagram of a system according to various embodiments of the invention.

FIG. 4 is a flow diagram illustrating several methods according to various embodiments of the invention.

FIG. 5A, FIG. 5B, and FIG. 5C are flow diagrams illustrating several calibration methods according to various embodiments of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of an apparatus 100 according to various embodiments of the invention. Many of the embodiments described herein may operate to automatically identify one or more unusable image sensor array (ISA) elements 102, including clusters thereof.

An unusable ISA element 102 may be of a stuck pixel variety, characterized by an output level that is unchanging as the illuminance incident to the stuck pixel changes, as previously described. A stuck pixel ISA element may comprise a bright defect or a dark defect. A darkly defective ISA element that is not of the stuck pixel variety may be occluded by dust particles (e.g., a dust particle 104). The dust particle 104 may fall on and lodge adjacent to the darkly defective ISA element. This may occur during or after assembly of a digital camera or other imaging system containing an ISA, such as an imaging system 105 comprising an ISA 106, for example. Unusable ISA elements may often be compensated if their position in the sensor matrix is known. Thus, the identification and remediation of the unusable elements may increase customer satisfaction by increasing image quality. Product costs may also be reduced as the number of defective product returns decreases.

Although some embodiments may be described herein in the context of a digital camera, many embodiments of the invention can be realized in other image sensor-based apparatus, systems, and applications, including cellular telephones, hand-held computers, laptop computers, desktop computers, automobiles, household appliances, medical equipment, point-of-sale equipment, and image recognition equipment, among others, collectively shown as a system 108.

FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram of the ISA 106 according to various embodiments of the invention. Some embodiments herein may operate to detect unusable sensor elements as those corresponding to pixels that remain in sharp focus in an image of a scene 206 captured using an image blurring technique. A lens 209 associated with the imaging system 105 may be defocused, for example, to create a blurred image. Other techniques may be used, including increasing exposure time to enhance the effect of camera movement (e.g., hand-shake) relative to the scene 206. An increase in exposure time may optionally be accompanied by a decrease in lens aperture, to maintain a constant exposure. The blurring technique may spread light from the scene 206 more evenly across the ISA 106 than would be the case with focused image capture. That is, optical contrast between the elements 207 of the ISA 106 may be decreased as a result of the blurring.

Each ISA element 207 may register a brightness value that is closer to brightness values registered by neighboring ISA elements than would be the case if the image were focused. However, an unusable ISA element, including the unusable

ISA elements **102**, for example, may be stuck at a constant output value, or may register a reduced output due to occlusions. As a result, the unusable ISA elements **102** may not register the contrast-reducing effect caused by the image blurring technique. The unusable ISA element **102** may thus “stand out” from other elements and may be identified using this characteristic.

Image sharpness may be measured as the rate of change of the brightness gradient across a set of adjacent pixels containing lighter and darker image features. It is thus noted that “brightness ratio,” “contrast ratio,” and “sharpness” are all intended to mean a first illuminance value divided by a second illuminance value.

Some embodiments may operate to scan the blurred, captured image to locate and identify the unusable ISA elements **102**. An ISA element **210** may be selected for testing during the scanning process. The brightness value registered by the selected ISA element **210** may be compared to an average brightness of a set of surrounding ISA elements **216**. Some embodiments may calculate a ratio of the brighter of these values to the other (i.e., the one that is less bright). The resulting contrast ratio may be compared to a threshold contrast value to determine whether the selected ISA element **210** is unusable. Although the set of surrounding ISA elements **216** is shown in FIG. 2 as immediately adjacent elements, some embodiments may utilize other element subsets of the ISA **106** as the set of surrounding ISA elements **216**. For example, in an ISA equipped with a color filter array, the surrounding elements may comprise nearby surrounding ISA elements of the same color as the ISA element **210**.

Turning back to FIG. 1, the apparatus **100** may include a defect detector **112** in the imaging system **105**. The defect detector **112** may test the selected ISA element **210** using a blurred image of the scene **206**. The defect detector **112** may identify the selected ISA element **210** as unusable if a contrast ratio between an illuminance indicated by the selected ISA element **210** and an average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding ISA elements **216** is greater than a threshold contrast value **116**.

In some embodiments, the average illuminance value may be calculated by summing illuminance values from each element in the set of surrounding ISA elements **216** and dividing the resulting sum by the unit quantity (i.e., number) of ISA elements in the set of surrounding ISA elements **216**. Some embodiments, on the other hand, may calculate the average illuminance value using other sub-sets of ISA elements from the ISA **106**.

Some embodiments herein may use signal outputs from ISA elements as an indirect measure of an illuminance incident to each respective ISA element. Thus, the illuminance indicated by the selected ISA element **210** may correspond to a magnitude of an illuminance signal from the selected ISA element **210**. Likewise, the illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding ISA elements **216** may correspond to an average of a set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements **216**.

The apparatus **100** may also include an ADC **117** coupled to the ISA **106**. The ADC **117** may digitize illuminance signals from the ISA **106**.

A digital gain and black level adjustment module **118** may be coupled to the ADC **117**. The digital gain and black level adjustment module **118** may perform a black level calibration on a digitized illuminance signal from the selected ISA element **210**. The adjustment may be performed such that the digitized illuminance signal from the selected ISA element **210** corresponds to a level of zero illuminance when no light is incident to the selected ISA element **210**.

A white point correction module **119** may be coupled to the ADC **117**. The white point correction module **119** may normalize the digitized illuminance signal from the ISA element by removing a color cast introduced by illuminating the scene **206** using light of a particular color temperature. Achromatic images may appear gray rather than tinted in a captured image as a result of the white point correction operation.

The apparatus **100** may also include a sharpness comparator **120** coupled to the defect detector **112**. The sharpness comparator **120** may calculate a contrast ratio associated with the magnitude of the illuminance signal from the ISA element and with the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements. The sharpness comparator **120** may also compare the resulting contrast ratio to the threshold contrast value **116**.

The threshold contrast value **116** may comprise a constant value associated with a design of the imaging system **105**. The threshold contrast value **116** may have been previously derived by a calibration imaging system **121**. In some embodiments, the calibration imaging system **121** may be external to the imaging system **105**. The threshold contrast value **116** may be stored in a threshold contrast memory **122** coupled to the sharpness comparator **120**.

The contrast ratio may be calculated as a first ratio of the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements **216** to the magnitude of the illuminance signal from the selected ISA element **210** if the first ratio yields a quotient of greater than or equal to one. Alternatively, the contrast ratio may be calculated as a second ratio of the magnitude of the illuminance signal from the selected ISA element **210** to the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements **216** if the second ratio yields a quotient greater than one.

Some of the unusable ISA element identification techniques described herein may use a minimum scene illumination **123** to achieve a desired level of accuracy. The apparatus **100** may thus include a scene illuminance comparator **124** coupled to the defect detector **112**. The scene illuminance comparator **124** may compare an illuminance corresponding to the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements **216** to a threshold illuminance value **126**. The apparatus **100** may operate to suppress unusable ISA element identification if the illuminance corresponding to the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements **216** is not greater than the threshold illuminance value **126**.

The threshold illuminance value **126** may comprise a constant value associated with a design of the imaging system **105**. The threshold illuminance value **126** may have been previously derived by the calibration imaging system **121**, as will be discussed below. The threshold illuminance value **126** may be stored in a threshold illuminance memory **130** coupled to the scene illuminance comparator **124**.

The apparatus **100** may further include a defect location memory **146** coupled to the defect detector **112**. The defect location memory **146** may store a location of the selected ISA element **210** relative to a matrix associated with locations on the ISA **106** if the selected ISA element **210** is identified as unusable. Defect correction logic **150** may be operatively coupled to the defect location memory **146** to adjust a captured image to compensate for the effect of the unusable ISA element on the captured image.

FIG. 3 is a block diagram of a representative system **300** according to various embodiments of the invention. The system **300** may include one or more of the apparatus **100**. The system **300** may also include the calibration imaging system

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121. In some embodiments, the calibration imaging system **121** may comprise a calibration digital camera. A calibration ISA **306** may be associated with the calibration imaging system **121**. The calibration ISA **306** may include one or more known unusable calibration ISA elements; and these elements may be present at known locations in the calibration ISA **306**. The calibration imaging system **121** may capture one or more series of blurred calibration images of a calibration scene **314** and test one or more calibration ISA elements **310**.

The system **300** may also include a calibration defect detector **318** operatively coupled to the calibration ISA **306**. The calibration defect detector **318** may identify the calibration ISA element **310** as a candidate unusable element based upon a contrast ratio between the calibration ISA element **310** and a set of surrounding calibration ISA elements **322**. The identification may be made, for example, if a calibration contrast ratio calculated from an illuminance indicated by the calibration ISA element **310** and an average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding calibration ISA elements **322** is greater than a calibration threshold contrast value.

Additionally, unusable ISA element identification may require that the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding ISA elements **322** be greater than a calibration threshold illuminance value. The two threshold values, calibration threshold contrast and calibration threshold illuminance, may be iteratively varied in a calibration sequence as discussed below.

A threshold selector **330** may be coupled to the calibration defect detector **318**. The threshold selector **330** may select a combination of the calibration threshold illuminance value and the calibration threshold contrast value suitable for reliable identification of the known unusable calibration ISA elements. The combination may be selected using a series of iterative tests to determine that the known unusable calibration ISA elements are reliably identified as unusable and that no other calibration ISA elements are identified as unusable.

The system **300** may also include an illuminance controller **334** coupled to the calibration defect detector **318**. The illuminance controller **334** may iteratively vary an average illuminance associated with the calibration scene **314** as the series of blurred calibration images is captured. It is noted that control of the average illuminance associated with the calibration scene **314** as sensed by the ISA **306** may be achieved by setting exposure time to a constant value and varying scene lighting or by maintaining the scene lighting unchanged while varying exposure time.

A threshold illuminance iterator **340** may be coupled to the threshold selector **330**. For each iteration of the average illuminance, the threshold illuminance iterator **340** may vary the calibration threshold illuminance value across a dynamic range of the calibration ISA **306** as the series of blurred calibration images is captured.

A scene illuminance comparator **344** may be coupled to the threshold illuminance iterator **340**. The scene illuminance comparator **344** may determine whether the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding ISA elements **322** is greater than the calibration threshold illuminance value.

The system **300** may also include a threshold sharpness iterator **348** coupled to the threshold selector **330**. The threshold sharpness iterator **348** may vary the calibration threshold contrast value across the dynamic range of the calibration ISA **306** for each iteration of the calibration threshold illuminance value as the set of blurred calibration images is captured.

A sharpness comparator **352** may be coupled to the threshold sharpness iterator **348** to calculate the calibration contrast ratio from the calibration scene **314** as imaged by the ISA **306**.

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The calibration contrast ratio may be calculated as the ratio of the illuminance indicated by the calibration ISA element **310** to the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding calibration ISA elements **322**. Alternatively, the inverse of the ratio of these two values may be used as the calibration contrast ratio, if greater. The sharpness comparator **352** may also determine whether the calibration contrast ratio is greater than the calibration threshold contrast value.

It is noted that the dynamic range of an ISA (e.g., of the calibration ISA **306**) may be represented by a histogram familiar to those of ordinary skill in the art. Brightness levels may range from a value of 0, corresponding to black or zero illuminance, to some greater value corresponding to white or maximum illuminance. The brightness level corresponding to white may be determined by a granularity of ADC conversion of signals generated by ISA elements in the ISA **306**. For example, a 10-bit version of an ADC **117** may enable $2^{10}=1024$ brightness levels. The value of 1023 may represent a brightness level corresponding to white. For this example, a contrast ratio of one illuminance value to another can vary from 1/1023 to 1023. Some embodiments herein may limit iterations of the calibration contrast ratio to the dynamic range of the ISA **306**, as previously mentioned.

The system **300** may also include a microcontroller unit (MCU) **362** coupled to the calibration imaging system **121**. The MCU **362** may comprise an application-specific integrated circuit, a digital signal processor, or both. The MCU **362** may perform system management and control operations.

Given the various arrangements of elements present to this point, one may consider an example of the operation of some of the embodiments disclosed herein. The calibration imaging system **121** may command the illuminance controller **334** to generate a small average illuminance from the calibration scene **314**. The threshold illuminance iterator **340** may then set the calibration threshold illuminance variable to a value corresponding to the dark end of the dynamic range of the calibration ISA **306**. Next, the threshold sharpness iterator **348** may set the calibration threshold contrast variable to a value corresponding to the dark end of the dynamic range of the calibration ISA **306**.

The calibration ISA **306** may then image the calibration scene **314**. The scene illuminance comparator **344** may compare the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding ISA elements **322** to the value of the calibration threshold illuminance variable. The sharpness comparator **352** may then calculate the calibration contrast ratio as the greater of the illuminance indicated by the calibration ISA element **310** to the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding calibration ISA elements **322**, or the inverse of the ratio of these two illuminance values.

Consider the case of a darkly defective known unusable calibration ISA element being selected by the calibration imaging system **121** for testing. The sharpness comparator **352** may determine that the calibration contrast ratio is large, because the calibration contrast ratio denominator comprises a small illuminance registered by the darkly defective ISA element. On the other hand, since the illuminance controller **334** initiated the testing scan by dimly illuminating the calibration scene **314**, the calibration contrast ratio numerator may also be small. This set of circumstances may result in a calibration contrast ratio that may not meet the criteria for the reliable identification of an unusable calibration ISA element. That is, the calibration contrast ratio may not be larger than the current low iteration of the calibration threshold contrast variable. As the illuminance controller iterates the average

calibration scene illuminance through higher values of illuminance, the criteria for reliable defect identification may eventually be met.

The average calibration scene illuminance, the calibration threshold illuminance variable, the calibration threshold contrast variable, and the calibration ISA element **310** selected for testing may each be iterated within successively subordinate loops. At each iteration of each variable, the selected calibration ISA element **310** may be tested using the iterated values to determine whether the selected calibration ISA element **310** is unusable. Those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that ranges, increments, and orders of operation may vary from the above-described example while maintaining the substance of the various inventive concepts. Some embodiments may iterate these four variables using hierarchical nests ordered differently than the example. Likewise, some embodiments may iterate the variables over appropriate ranges other than the calibration ISA dynamic range, or in a different order than darkest-to-brightest illuminance values.

Combinations of the calibration threshold illuminance variable and the calibration threshold contrast variable that result in a correct identification of the known unusable calibration ISA elements and that do not result in a mis-identification of a known good calibration ISA element may be selected as candidate threshold values. The smallest of the candidate threshold illuminance values and the candidate threshold contrast values may be chosen as the threshold illuminance value **126** and the threshold contrast value **116**, respectively. The latter threshold values may be applicable to imaging systems of similar design as the calibration imaging system **121**, and may thus be used in the imaging system **105**.

Any of the components previously described may be implemented in a number of ways, including embodiments in software. Software embodiments may be used in a simulation system; and the output of such a system may drive the various apparatus described herein.

Thus, the apparatus **100**; the ISA elements **102**, **207**, **210**, **216**, **310**, **322**; the dust particle **104**; the imaging systems **105**, **121**; the ISAs **106**, **306**; the systems **108**, **300**; the scenes **206**, **314**; the lens **209**; the defect detectors **112**, **318**; the threshold values **116**, **126**; the ADC **117**; the digital gain and black level adjustment module **118**; the white point correction module **119**; the comparators **120**, **124**, **344**, **352**; the memories **122**, **130**, **146**; the scene illumination **123**; the illuminance value **126**; the defect correction logic **150**; the threshold selector **330**; the illuminance controller **334**; the illuminance iterator **340**; the sharpness iterator **348**; and the MCU **362** may all be characterized as “modules” herein.

The modules may include hardware circuitry, single or multi-processor circuits, memory circuits, software program modules and objects, firmware, and combinations thereof, as desired by the architect of the apparatus **100** and the system **300** and as appropriate for particular implementations of various embodiments.

The apparatus and systems of various embodiments may be useful in applications other than identifying unusable image sensor elements. Thus, various embodiments of the invention are not to be so limited. The illustrations of the apparatus **100** and the system **300** are intended to provide a general understanding of the structure of various embodiments. They are not intended to serve as a complete description of all the elements and features of apparatus and systems that might make use of the structures described herein.

The novel apparatus and systems of various embodiments may comprise and/or be included in electronic circuitry used in high-speed computers, communication and signal processing circuitry, single or multi-processor modules, single or

multiple embedded processors, multi-core processors, data switches, and application-specific modules, including multi-layer, multi-chip modules. Such apparatus and systems may further be included as sub-components within a variety of electronic systems, such as televisions, cellular telephones, personal computers (e.g., laptop computers, desktop computers, handheld computers, tablet computers, etc.), workstations, radios, video players, audio players (e.g., MP3 (Motion Picture Experts Group, Audio Layer 3) players), vehicles, medical devices (e.g., heart monitor, blood pressure monitor, etc.), set top boxes, and others. Some embodiments may include a number of methods.

FIG. **4** is a flow diagram illustrating several methods according to various embodiments of the invention. In some embodiments, a method **400** may operate to analyze a blurred image of an imaged scene and use image sharpness to identify an unusable ISA element associated with an ISA in an imaging system. The contrast between an illuminance indicated by an ISA element selected for testing and an average illuminance indicated by a set of ISA elements surrounding the selected ISA element (“surrounding ISA elements”) may be used as a measure of sharpness.

In some embodiments, the set of surrounding ISA elements may be immediately adjacent to the selected ISA element; however other configurations are possible, as described above. In some embodiments, the production imaging system may be configured as a digital camera. Unusable ISA element identification may occur during normal operation of an imaging system that employs some of the embodiments described herein.

The method **400** may commence at block **403** with selecting a test ISA element in an imaging system. The method **400** may continue at block **405** with imaging a scene with the imaging system using an image blurring technique. Various image blurring techniques may be used, including defocusing a lens associated with the imaging system. Other techniques may include facilitating blurring caused by camera movement by increasing exposure time while optionally reducing lens aperture. For example, a camera phone may experience a substantial handshake. Blurring effects of the handshake may be amplified by increasing exposure time (e.g., to one second), and optionally reducing the lens aperture to avoid over-exposure. Any image stabilization technique normally operating in the camera may be disabled during this activity.

The method **400** may include measuring the magnitude of an illuminance signal from the ISA element to be tested, at block **409**. An illuminance signal magnitude from each of the set of surrounding ISA elements may be measured at block **415**. The method **400** may also include calculating an average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements at block **419**.

The method **400** may continue at block **423** with testing whether a first ratio of the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements to the magnitude of the illuminance signal from the ISA element is greater than a threshold sharpness value. If so, the ISA element to be tested may be identified as a dark defect element, at block **427**.

If the first ratio is not greater than the threshold sharpness value, the method **400** may continue at block **431** with determining whether an inverse of the first ratio of the magnitude of the illuminance signal from the ISA element to the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements is greater than the threshold sharpness value. If so, the method **400** may identify the ISA element as a bright defect element, at block **435**. If the inverse ratio is not greater than the threshold sharpness value, testing

of the ISA element may terminate and additional ISA elements may be selected and tested, beginning at block 403.

The scene illumination available may be so low as to be inadequate to produce sufficient contrast for reliable defect identification using contrast-dependent methods represented by the method 400. An average illuminance value associated with the set of surrounding ISA elements may correspond to the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of surrounding ISA elements. To more consistently provide adequate scene illumination for reliable identification, the method 400 may also include determining whether the average illuminance value associated with the set of surrounding ISA elements is greater than a threshold illuminance value, at block 439. If so, the method 400 may continue with storing a record of the identified unusable ISA element in a defect memory, at block 443. If the surrounding ISA element average illuminance value is not greater than the threshold illuminance value, testing of the ISA element may terminate with discarding the unusable ISA element identification, at block 449. Additional ISA elements may be selected and tested, beginning at block 403.

FIGS. 5A, 5B, and 5C are flow diagrams illustrating several calibration methods according to various embodiments of the invention. In some embodiments, a method 500 may use a calibration imaging system to determine the threshold illuminance value and the threshold sharpness value, both used for identification of unusable ISA elements in the method 400 described above. The method 500 may include repeatedly imaging a calibration scene using an image blurring technique and attempting to correctly identify one or more known unusable calibration ISA elements present at known locations in a calibration ISA associated with the calibration imaging system.

The method 500 may iterate the threshold illuminance value and the threshold sharpness value and test elements of the calibration ISA at each iteration. The method 500 may select a combination of these values such that the known unusable calibration ISA elements are reliably detected. The known unusable calibration ISA elements may be classified as calibration dark defect elements, calibration bright defect elements, or a combination thereof.

The method 500 may execute a series of nested looping activities to test various combinations of calibration scene illuminance values, threshold calibration illuminance values, and threshold calibration sharpness values, and to scan through a matrix of calibration ISA elements associated with the calibration ISA.

The method 500 may commence with iteratively varying an average calibration illuminance associated with the calibration scene as measured by the calibration imaging system at block 507. For each iteration of the average calibration illuminance, the method 500 may iterate a calibration threshold illuminance variable at block 511. For each iteration of the calibration threshold illuminance variable, the method 500 may iterate a calibration threshold sharpness variable at block 515.

For each iteration of the calibration threshold sharpness variable, the method 500 may scan through the matrix of calibration ISA elements at block 517. The method 500 may perform a calibration sharpness test on a calibration ISA element selected for testing by the iteration block 517. The average illuminance associated with the calibration scene, the calibration threshold illuminance variable, and/or the calibration threshold sharpness variable may be iterated through a range corresponding to a dynamic range of the calibration ISA. Those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that ranges, increments, and orders of operation may vary from

the above-described example while maintaining the substance of the various inventive concepts.

Turning now to FIG. 5B, it can be seen that the method 500 may continue at block 525 with measuring a magnitude of an illuminance signal from the selected calibration ISA element. The method 500 may also include measuring a magnitude of an illuminance signal from each one of a set of calibration ISA elements surrounding the selected calibration ISA element, at block 529. The surrounding calibration ISA elements may lie immediately adjacent to the selected calibration ISA element, or may lie in some other physical relationship with the selected calibration ISA element. The method 500 may further include calculating an average of the set of calibration illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of calibration ISA elements surrounding the selected calibration ISA element, at block 533.

The method 500 may include calculating a first calibration ISA element sharpness ratio as the magnitude of the calibration illuminance signal from the selected calibration ISA element divided by the average of the set of calibration illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of calibration ISA elements surrounding the selected calibration ISA element at block 537.

The method 500 may also include calculating a second calibration ISA element sharpness ratio as the average of the set of illuminance signal magnitudes from the set of calibration ISA elements surrounding the selected calibration ISA element divided by the magnitude of the illuminance signal from the selected calibration ISA element, at block 541. The method 500 may further include selecting the greater of the first or second calibration ISA element sharpness ratio as the calibration ISA element sharpness ratio at block 543.

The method 500 may continue at block 549 with comparing the calibration ISA element sharpness ratio to the current calibration threshold sharpness variable value at block 549. The method 500 may also include comparing the average illuminance associated with the calibration scene to the current calibration threshold illuminance variable value at block 553.

Turning now to FIG. 5C, it can be seen that the method 500 may test to determine whether the calibration ISA element sharpness ratio is greater than the current value of the calibration threshold sharpness variable at block 557. If not, the method 500 may continue at block 561 of FIG. 5A. If the calibration ISA element sharpness ratio is greater than the current value of the calibration threshold sharpness variable, the method 500 may continue at block 565.

At block 565, the method 500 may test to determine whether the average scene illuminance is greater than the current value of the calibration threshold illuminance variable. If not, the method 500 may continue at block 561 of FIG. 5A. If the average scene illuminance is greater than the current value of the calibration threshold illuminance variable, the method 500 may continue at block 569.

At block 569, the method 500 may test to determine whether the calibration ISA element being tested is one of the known unusable calibration ISA elements. If not, the method 500 may identify the selected calibration ISA element as mis-identified at block 573. The method 500 may then continue at block 561 of FIG. 5A. If the calibration ISA element being tested is one of the known unusable calibration ISA elements, the method 500 may identify the selected calibration ISA element as defective at block 575. The method 500 may then continue at block 561 of FIG. 5A.

Turning back to FIG. 5A, the method 500 may continue at block 561 with testing to determine whether the selected calibration ISA element was identified as defective. If not, the

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method 500 may return to block 517 to select a next calibration ISA element to test. If the selected calibration ISA element was identified as defective, the method 500 may continue with testing whether the selected calibration ISA element was mis-identified at block 579. If so, the method 500 may return to block 517 to select a next calibration ISA element to test.

If the selected calibration ISA element was not mis-identified, the method 500 may continue at block 583 with flagging the current value of the calibration threshold illuminance variable as a candidate threshold illuminance value. The method 500 may also flag the current value of the calibration threshold sharpness variable as a candidate threshold sharpness value at block 587. The method 500 may then continue at block 517. Some embodiments may delete a candidate threshold illuminance value and a candidate threshold sharpness value as candidates if one or more known defective ISA elements are not correctly identified as defective by the method 500 using these threshold values.

The method 500 may perform calibration ISA element sharpness testing on the one or more selected calibration ISA elements associated with the calibration ISA for various combinations of the calibration threshold sharpness variable, the calibration threshold illuminance variable, and the calibration scene illuminance. Each time a selected calibration ISA element is identified as defective and not as mis-identified, the method 500 may flag the calibration threshold variables as candidate threshold values. In some embodiments, the nested series of iterative loops may end at block 593.

The method 500 may continue at block 593 with selecting a smallest candidate threshold illuminance value from the various candidate threshold values that may have been identified. The smallest candidate threshold illuminance value may be selected as the threshold illuminance value. The method 500 may also include selecting a smallest candidate threshold sharpness value as the threshold sharpness value at block 595. The threshold illuminance value and the threshold sharpness value may be used in the method 400, above. The method 500 may terminate at block 597.

It should be noted that the activities described herein may be executed in an order other than the order described. The various activities described with respect to the methods identified herein may also be executed in repetitive, serial, and/or parallel fashion.

A software program may be launched from a computer-readable medium in a computer-based system to execute functions defined in the software program. Various programming languages may be employed to create software programs designed to implement and perform the methods disclosed herein. The programs may be structured in an object-oriented format using an object-oriented language such as Java or C++. Alternatively, the programs may be structured in a procedure-oriented format using a procedural language, such as assembly or C. The software components may communicate using a number of mechanisms well known to those skilled in the art, such as application program interfaces or inter-process communication techniques, including remote procedure calls. The teachings of various embodiments are not limited to any particular programming language or environment.

Implementing the apparatus, systems, and methods disclosed herein may operate to identify unusable ISA elements in an imaging system during normal operation following manufacturing, using minimal memory and logic resources. The identification and remediation of the unusable elements may increase customer satisfaction by increasing image qual-

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ity. Product costs may also be reduced as the number of defective product returns decreases.

The accompanying drawings that form a part hereof show, by way of illustration and not of limitation, specific embodiments in which the subject matter may be practiced. The embodiments illustrated are described in sufficient detail to enable those skilled in the art to practice the teachings disclosed herein. Other embodiments may be utilized and derived therefrom, such that structural and logical substitutions and changes may be made without departing from the scope of this disclosure. This Detailed Description, therefore, is not to be taken in a limiting sense, and the scope of various embodiments is defined only by the appended claims, along with the full range of equivalents to which such claims are entitled.

Such embodiments of the inventive subject matter may be referred to herein individually or collectively by the term "invention" merely for convenience and without intending to voluntarily limit the scope of this application to any single invention or inventive concept, if more than one is in fact disclosed. Thus, although specific embodiments have been illustrated and described herein, any arrangement calculated to achieve the same purpose may be substituted for the specific embodiments shown. This disclosure is intended to cover any and all adaptations or variations of various embodiments. Combinations of the above embodiments, and other embodiments not specifically described herein, will be apparent to those of skill in the art upon reviewing the above description.

The Abstract of the Disclosure is provided to comply with 37 C.F.R. §1.72(b), requiring an abstract that will allow the reader to quickly ascertain the nature of the technical disclosure. It is submitted with the understanding that it will not be used to interpret or limit the scope or meaning of the claims. In the foregoing Detailed Description, various features are grouped together in a single embodiment for the purpose of streamlining the disclosure. This method of disclosure is not to be interpreted to require more features than are expressly recited in each claim. Rather, inventive subject matter may be found in less than all features of a single disclosed embodiment. Thus the following claims are hereby incorporated into the Detailed Description, with each claim standing on its own as a separate embodiment.

What is claimed is:

1. A system comprising:

- a calibration imaging system to capture a plurality of blurred calibration images of a calibration scene, wherein at least one known unusable calibration image sensor array (ISA) element is present at a known location in a calibration ISA associated with the calibration imaging system;
- a calibration defect detector operatively coupled to the calibration ISA to identify a calibration ISA element as a candidate unusable element if a calibration contrast ratio calculated from an illuminance indicated by the calibration ISA element and an average illuminance indicated by a set of surrounding calibration ISA elements is greater than a calibration threshold contrast value, and the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding ISA elements is greater than a calibration threshold illuminance value;
- a threshold selector coupled to the calibration defect detector to select a combination of the calibration threshold illuminance value and the calibration threshold contrast value such that the at least one known unusable calibra-

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tion ISA element is reliably identified as unusable and no other calibration ISA elements are identified as unusable;

an illuminance controller coupled to the calibration defect detector to iteratively vary an illuminance associated with the calibration scene as ones of the plurality of blurred calibration images are captured;

a threshold illuminance iterator coupled to the threshold selector to iteratively vary the calibration threshold illuminance value across a dynamic range of the calibration ISA for each iteration of the average illuminance associated with the calibration scene as the ones of the plurality of blurred calibration images are captured; and

a threshold sharpness iterator coupled to the threshold selector to vary the calibration threshold contrast value across the dynamic range of the calibration ISA for each iteration of the calibration threshold illuminance value as the ones of the plurality of blurred calibration images are captured.

2. The system of claim 1, further comprising:

a microcontroller unit (MCU) coupled to the calibration imaging system to perform system management and control operations, wherein the MCU comprises at least one of an application-specific integrated circuit or a digital signal processor.

3. The system of claim 1, further comprising:

a scene illuminance comparator coupled to the threshold illuminance iterator to determine whether the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding calibration ISA elements is greater than the calibration threshold illuminance value.

4. The system of claim 1, further comprising:

a sharpness comparator coupled to the threshold sharpness iterator to calculate the calibration contrast ratio as the greater of the illuminance indicated by the calibration ISA element to the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding calibration ISA elements and the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding calibration ISA elements to the illuminance indicated by the calibration ISA element, and to determine whether the calibration contrast ratio is greater than the calibration threshold contrast value.

5. The system of claim 1, wherein the calibration imaging system comprises a calibration digital camera.

6. The system of claim 1, further comprising a digital camera coupled to the calibration imaging system.

7. A method comprising:

capturing a plurality of blurred calibration images of a calibration scene, wherein at least one known unusable calibration image sensor array (ISA) element is present at a known location in a calibration ISA associated with the calibration imaging system;

identifying a calibration ISA element as a candidate unusable element if a calibration contrast ratio calculated from an illuminance indicated by the calibration ISA element and an average illuminance indicated by a set of surrounding calibration ISA elements is greater than a calibration threshold contrast value, and the average illuminance indicated by the set of surrounding ISA elements is greater than a calibration threshold illuminance value;

selecting a combination of the calibration threshold illuminance value and the calibration threshold contrast value such that the at least one known unusable calibration ISA element is reliably identified as unusable and no other calibration ISA elements are identified as unusable;

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iteratively varying an illuminance associated with the calibration scene as ones of the plurality of blurred calibration images are captured;

iterating a calibration threshold illuminance variable for each iteration of the average calibration illuminance associated with the calibration scene; and

iterating a calibration threshold sharpness variable for each iteration of the calibration threshold illuminance variable.

8. The method of claim 7, wherein iteratively varying an illuminance associated with the calibration scene includes iteratively varying an average calibration illuminance associated with the calibration scene.

9. The method of claim 7, further comprising:

performing a calibration sharpness test on each calibration ISA element in the calibration ISA associated with the calibration imaging system for each iteration of the calibration threshold sharpness variable.

10. The method of claim 9, further comprising:

flagging values of the calibration threshold illuminance variable as candidate threshold illuminance values and flagging values of the calibration threshold sharpness variable as candidate threshold sharpness values if the calibration sharpness test performed on the each calibration ISA element in the calibration ISA identifies the each calibration ISA element as defective and not as mis-identified.

11. The method of claim 10, further comprising:

selecting a smallest candidate threshold illuminance value as the threshold illuminance value.

12. The method of claim 11, further comprising:

selecting a smallest candidate threshold sharpness value as the threshold sharpness value.

13. The method of claim 9, wherein the calibration sharpness test comprises:

calculating a calibration ISA element sharpness ratio;

comparing the calibration ISA element sharpness ratio to the calibration threshold sharpness variable,

comparing the average illuminance associated with the calibration scene to the calibration threshold illuminance variable.

14. The method of claim 13, further comprising:

identifying the each calibration ISA element in the calibration ISA as defective if the calibration ISA element sharpness ratio is greater than the calibration threshold sharpness variable, if the average illuminance associated with the calibration scene is greater than the calibration threshold illuminance variable, and if the each calibration ISA element in the calibration ISA is the at least one known unusable calibration ISA element.

15. The method of claim 13, further comprising:

identifying the each calibration ISA element as mis-identified if the calibration ISA element sharpness ratio is greater than the calibration threshold sharpness variable, if the average illuminance associated with the calibration scene is greater than the calibration threshold illuminance variable, and if the each calibration ISA element is not the at least one known unusable calibration ISA element.

16. The method of claim 7, wherein an iteration range of at least one of the average illuminance associated with the calibration scene, the calibration threshold illuminance variable, or the calibration threshold sharpness variable corresponds to a dynamic range of the calibration ISA.